

“Should sustainable consumption and production be a policy priority for developing countries and if so, what areas should they focus on?”

As the human–resource–environment nexus is one of the serious issues confronting mankind, it is essential for developing countries to put in place proper sustainable consumption and production policies. These countries should focus on fostering a culture of sustainable consumption, enhancing legislation, reforming taxation and implementing recycling economy patterns. More specifically, as globalization merges consumerism with local traditional cultures, such as has been observed in China in recent years, the sustainable consumption culture should be formed and disseminated by education and training beginning in primary schools all the way through to college. Sustainable products and industries that exploit natural resources in an ecologically efficient manner should receive financial and technological support from public policy. Moreover, tax systems need an overhaul through imposition of ecological taxes that fall heavily on energy-intensive products and lightly on clean, sustainable products. Local and central governments should reform economy evaluation systems by introducing Green GDP accounting in public administration. Finally, the sustainable production should include recycling economy patterns that change the material flow from the traditional linear mode of natural resource/product/pollutant, to the new loop of natural resource/industrial product/recycled resource.

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Sustainable consumption and production should be a policy priority for developing countries. The reasons in my view are threefold. First, developing countries are relatively better positioned to effectively take up such challenges. This may seem counter-intuitive. However, their societies are to

a lesser extent embedded in liberal agenda-driven policies pursuing economic growth with marginal consideration for social cohesion and the environment. Their historical evolutions have to a lesser extent locked their economic behaviour and growth processes into a vicious circle of unsustainable patterns, as is often the case for advanced market-economies. There is greater scope for them to take the lead in redefining development paradigms. Second, the developing world is ridden with deep poverty and environmental problems and their need for more sustainable thinking and progress is greater than ever. And third, they possess a tremendous pool of workforce and ideas that could, in theory, rapidly accelerate sustainable innovation. This brings me to a priority area much undervalued, i.e., “sustainable” education and employment. Tapping the extraordinary human resource potential through education and widespread employment opportunities could veer their economies towards rethinking demand (often neglected) and supply patterns. How this may be achieved is the subject of much lengthier discussions and debates.

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It would be difficult to argue against following sustainable consumption and production (SCP) practices for any country in the world. In the case of developing countries, however, sustainable consumption may actually translate into higher levels of consumption given the extremely low levels of current consumption and the established link between adequate consumption and the human development index! Sustainable production too would carry

a different meaning given the stage of development of the country. For the low income countries, the mere generation of local production capacity and the accompanying job creation and cost reduction could be interpreted as 'sustainable' production.

Defining sustainable production and consumption as efficiency in resource utilization, in particular energy efficiency, would pre-suppose access to more advanced technologies and the existence of competitive markets and a robust financial and human infrastructure. As such, along the way to promoting SCP, most developing countries would need to be supported with the most basic development priorities. In the case of the more advanced developing countries, the focus areas would definitely need to be on rational resource pricing supported by a robust regulatory framework.

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Does sustainable development restrict progress, or can it serve as an engine for growth, breathing new life into a sick model? (A. Ramos). This question has been debated in numerous international forums in recent decades. It is today an accepted fact that market economies are hobbled by environmental problems. Periods of zero growth and economic recession are encouraging the promotion of sustainable markets in order to ensure resources for all, and to safeguard the environment for future generations.

Are sustainable markets viable in developing countries? A look at the vast populations of the disadvantaged, with their subsistence economies and environmental problems, gives little reason for optimism. But the establishment of sustainable markets in these countries is one of the most pressing global problems to be addressed if we are to protect the biosphere.

One crucial point has become evident to me from my experience in territorial planning in the poorer areas of Latin America, and that is that developmental policy and markets must always make people's security their main priority (security in food, health, environment, supply networks...). Sustainable markets are impossible in populations under stress. Development policies must therefore incorporate all the training programmes, technological tools and research necessary to optimise the security of populations, as an indispensable requisite for encouraging the development of sustainable markets in developing countries.

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The dynamics of consumption and production go to the heart of humanity's impact on the environment and are a central theme of promoting a global sustainable development. Based on this assessment these issues do need to be a priority for developing countries. However, these nations need to focus on understanding the nature of sustainable consumption and production from a perspective that is complex, non-linear and adaptive in nature. Extended supply chains through processes of globalization at once integrate and marginalize developing nations each of which has very specific priorities and concerns. Policies adopted in developing nations cannot be understood in isolation from the intimate governance process and power plays that exist between the developed and developing nations as well as the impact of multinational corporations within this process. Furthermore, these processes are not static but are in a constant state of transition and need to be regularly and effectively re-assessed. The transnational nature of the global factors of production and consumption mean that communication and constructive dialogue between all those actors that are responsible for promoting any dimension of sustainable development are essential. The role of the United Nations in effecting this dialogue is central to this process.

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Developing countries are quite different from each other. For countries on the fast track of economic growth, like India and China, sustainable consumption and production should be a policy priority, but for countries enduring civil war, malnutrition and poverty, I don't think it is possible to consider sustainability before tackling some more serious issues.

If we define areas of top priority as those that need urgent attention and will result in greatest environmental benefits, I don't think it is easy to identify one or two areas that are universal even among those fast-growing economies, as their social and economic structures are quite different. If I have to name two areas of priority, I would say vehicular pollution and greenhouse gas emissions should be the top priorities in the next few years since: 1. Greenhouse gas emissions are irreversible, and need to be attended to urgently; and 2. Vehicle ownership in some developing countries is growing at an exponential rate, and is likely to have long-term impacts on the environment.

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In short, the answer is no.

Based on the data of the Sustainable Society Index¹, SSI-2008, the levels of quality of life and sustainability of 151 countries have been calculated. The level of sustainability is lowest for high income countries. This raises the question of how one can ask developing countries to improve their level of sustainability. One should primarily urge high income countries to improve their performance.

Zooming in on the indicators that focus on sustainability, it appears that the scores for Ecological Footprint — a proxy for Sustainable Consumption and Production — are way better for low and middle income countries than for high income ones.

For two indicators low and middle income countries score — on average — lower than high income countries: Waste Recycling and Forest Area. These two areas would be the best to focus on (bearing in mind that the deforestation is mainly due to the consumption in high income countries). A third one would be biodiversity. With respect to waste recycling it should be noted that much of the effort on recycling in developing countries is not represented in the official statistics. Thus the scores could be better than the statistical data indicate.

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An essential aspect of sustainable consumption and production (SCP) is the (absolute) decoupling of economic growth (or human well-being in the widest sense) and resource consumption (“dematerialization”). This type of decoupling is also necessary to reduce environmental pressures. For many developing countries promoting economic growth is of paramount importance in improving the living standards of the population. SCP is, therefore, a necessary prerequisite for achieving all dimensions of sustainable development.

An obvious candidate to focus on is the energy sector. Energy consuming goods are characterized by “hot spots” — areas that consume large amounts of energy and account for high (greenhouse gas) emissions. For energy consuming goods hot spots are typically “downstream” — in the consumption phase of a product’s life cycle. By outsourcing the supply of energy-intensive products to developing countries the production (“upstream”) hot spots have also moved to these countries. Ultimately, all stages along the value chain of a product are linked.

Failing to focus on these hot spots limits the scope of SCP options available.

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Even as climate change gained international attention, our discussion on the 2008/2009 financial crisis has mostly focused on ‘stimulating insufficient demand’. Have we ever considered there is an excess supply instead?

Advocating sustainable consumption in developing countries should not be asking people to constrain their welfare level. Instead, it is the concept of wealth that needs updating. For instance, the ability to own a car should not be considered as an increase in social status. The example of low-cost cars, broadening consumption, demonstrates an entirely opposite direction to sustainable consumption and production. Losing traditional values is often observed in a growing economy. The problems with deviating from sustainable paths and disappearing traditional values can actually be solved together by updating the concept of wealth. Developing countries can hardly achieve this without value changes in developed countries as well as borrowing technology from the developed world to achieve a low-carbon production trajectory.

The concept of wealth should be changed. GDP and monetary income should not be the sole indicators of wealth. Elements such as spiritual assets, (environmental) health and aesthetics also contribute to comfort and satisfaction. This concept does not violate the fundamental principle of meeting low income groups’ subsistence level of consumption.

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Sustainable consumption and production should focus on establishing efficient *value chains*, i.e., vertical alliances between independent business organizations within a supply chain, which is cited by the World Bank as a first policy objective in supporting sustainable growth and reducing poverty in developing countries. Consider the example of rice, the fastest growing crop in Africa. Although the comparative advantage of domestic rice production has been one of the key issues in the African

food policy debate since the eighties, policies for increasing competitiveness have mainly focused on productivity and prices. The failure of the 1994 devaluation of the West African CFA franc, a failed attempt to link domestic consumers to local rice and reduce import dependence, illustrated the need for alternative, non-price strategies. Value chains are built on co-operation rather than adversarial business relationships; its members recognize that they must create a win-win situation whereby they all benefit financially and are all part of the information sharing and decision-making process. Hence, by linking producers to consumers through a shared objective, value chains present a more sustainable approach to consumption and production than segmented and adversarial production chains. Therefore, establishing efficient value chains should be a policy priority for developing countries.

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Sustainability is achieved when per capita levels of welfare remain constant or increase over time. With environmental degradation and population growth, per capita levels of welfare might decline over time, especially in developing countries. Developing countries perceive the material wealth and the way of life prevailing in developed countries as a desirable outcome for their own economies. In particular, the excessive consumption of electronic goods (i.e., mobile phones, computers, ipods, etc.) and consumer durables such as pre-packaged foods, soft drinks, toiletries, disposable products, cheap goods with a lifespan of less than 12 months, cultivates the wasteful behaviour rampant in developed countries.

Although meeting basic needs such as food, housing and clothing is important, the luxuries that come with advanced economies appeal to developing countries. Should developing countries follow exactly the same path that developed countries have taken in the past, it might be more difficult to achieve sustainability. Sustainability is a very complex process in which the present consumerism model of higher profits will not survive. In my opinion, developing countries are inherently sustainable. They only need less polluting production processes and more resources to build infrastructures and allow for more recycling.

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Education and promoting a change in lifestyle are indispensable for achieving global sustainable development.

Each country is very different from others, and the way they must proceed is by getting in touch with the needs of their society and the strengths and weaknesses they represent.

Some experiences have shown that adjusting legislation is not enough to meet the challenge. A lot of work through promotion and education about the changes needed and the people's role in these is also required. Furthermore, governments need to adjust their own practices and serve as a role model, both because the government's budget provides a very strong lever to negotiate buying and using sustainable products, and to promote better common practices.

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This should be a 'must' policy to have because natural resources contribute significantly to the livelihood of most poor people in developing countries. Natural resources are harvested for household consumption and sold to generate income. However, challenges such as climate change, pollution, land tenure conflict, and overexploitation of natural resources, threaten the sustainability of natural resources — which could increase malnutrition, food insecurity and poverty.

Developing countries should therefore develop policies that promote sustainable use and production of natural resources for the benefit of poor people. Few developing countries have progressed on this regard, and gaps remain in the implementation of those policies.

As a result, we believe that policies on sustainable consumption and production of natural resources in developing countries should be developed and implemented as a matter of urgency to improve the livelihoods of the poor. Such policies should address both sustainable use and production of natural resources, including, but not limited to resource use regulation, conservation and management of natural resources, research and development, community participation, benefit sharing mechanisms and should address current challenges on sustainable consumption and production of natural resources.

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